

For Release:  
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THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART PRESENTS

The Development of Stage Design

A Permanent Exhibit

of the new

Theater Arts Gallery

Opening April 20, 1960

(Photo of Globe Theater Interior with Stage)

The Department of Education of The Cleveland Museum of Art presents its historic theater models and stage sets, restored and dramatically lighted, in a new installation, arranged to show the development of stage design. These models were prepared at the Graduate School of Yale University, in 1939, under the direction of Professor Elemer Nagy, a former associate of Max Reinhardt in Vienna, and are based on careful research in early prints and documents. Along with an excellent model of the Globe Theater, (see photo), as Shakespeare used it, 1598-1613, which was made by Ernest Conklin of Roslyn, Long Island, the historic theater models were acquired for the Museum by Dr. Thomas Munro through a grant from the General Education Board, New York. The model of the Globe, Shakespeare's favorite playhouse, shows the ground plan similar to an inn-yard, the apron stage extending into the Pit, three stage levels, doors to actors' dressing rooms, trapdoors for ghosts, and on the roof the "hat" from which the theater flag was flown indicating whether the play was to be tragic, comic, or historical.

This set of historic theater models and stage sets covers 2500 years of stage design. Some of the sets are powered with motors to change the scenery (in place of the mechanical power of stage-hands and pulleys) or are equipped for lighting changes to illustrate different effects.

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Until the Golden Age of Greece, none of the great ancient civilisations, with the possible exception of China, built theaters. Courtyards of palaces and temples, threshing-floors, city streets and plazas, and hollows in the hills were pressed into service as playing-spaces, and even occasionally remodeled. But a special architectural unit built for use as a theater and nothing else, did not exist until nearly 500 B.C. Even the earliest theaters, and their descendants for centuries afterward, carried the framework of their temple or courtyard or hillside origin. And for many more centuries the stages were bare of scenery or any illusion of place or time other than the actor's words. Drama needed primarily only the play, the actor, and the playing-space. The more complex and elaborate arts of costume, settings, and theater building took time to develop. Although costume appeared almost as soon as actors, theater building took longer and stage sets came last of all.

The ancient Greeks, with their open-air, almost-circular seating-space, their excellent acoustics, circular orchestra or playing-space, and marble scene building, used the facade of this little temple-like structure for a permanent set, which imagination must see as a palace, a city street or a forest. The Museum's set of models begins with a replica of the Greek Theater of Dionysos at Athens, ca. 400 B.C., the earliest true theatrical architecture in the Western world. It is followed by a model of the type of simple platform stage with curtains which was set up in the naves and chancels of churches in the early Middle Ages. Between these two models is the historical rent which the Dark Ages made in the history of the theater. During the decline of the Roman Empire, classic theaters were closed, and allowed to fall into ruin, and drama was banned as sinful. Bits of it survived in the mimes and mountebanks, perhaps to reawaken in the Renaissance Comedia dell'Arte, but a new drama was born in the very church that had banned it, as the clergy began to dramatize sacred stories. The clergy

used no sets and built no theaters, but by the 15th century actual sets were being used by the laymen who had taken over this religious drama. Our third model shows a group of these sets as they looked in 1547, assembled in a town square in France. The whole group includes six small sets and four doorways as scenes in the Life of Christ. Instead of changing the scenery for each act, they moved the audience from set to set!

The fourth model shows the English version of this late medieval religious performance, which used a series of "pageant wagons" to bear the various scenes, so that, although the sets were still not changed, the play did come to the audience and the audience could stay in one place. However, there was no building over their heads and it was S.R.O. in the literal sense.

Shakespeare's Globe, coming next in our set of models, developed independently from the European Renaissance theaters. Based on the inn-yard used by actors throughout England, it returned to the ancient courtyard plan for drama in the Near East and the Orient. Shakespeare, however, used no stage sets, calling (like the ancient Greeks) upon the imagination of his audience and the magic of his poetry to summon "the cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces."<sup>1</sup> The development of this type of theater was arrested by the English Puritan rule of the mid-17th century.

Our series of theater models next presents four Renaissance stages; the first two being simple platform stages easily moved from place to place. One was the university type of stage, an early attempt to guess how the Romans staged a play, but without architectural research into the form of the theater. The other was the stage for the *Commedia dell'Arte*, the "professional comedy" of the Italians, which revived old Roman plots, and was the great "ad lib" theater of all time, for the actors made up the lines as they went along. The model of the

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<sup>1</sup> The Complete Works of William Shakespeare. Walter J. Black, Inc. New York, N.Y. n.d. "The Tempest", Act IV, Scene I, p. 19.

famous Teatro Olimpico at Vicenza, designed by Palladio, is a close replica of the actual Roman stage of antiquity, except for its enlarged central doorway - the ancestor of the proscenium arch - and its perspective street scenes. This, like the Roman stage, was a permanent set. The last of the four Renaissance models, however, is the first in the modern line of changeable stage sets - Serlio's architectural scene for a tragedy, with stage perspective and angle-wings. The same set was used for an entire play, but changed between performances.

There follows an elaborate 17th century stage with many movable flat wings, back-drops and cloud machine with a "glory" - the climax of pure spectacle in stage settings. The 18th century English stage, which comes next, replaces the spectacle with the intimate scene suitable to the comedy of manners popular in that century. The painter now supersedes the architect in devising stage sets. The 19th century, represented by a scene from a Charles Kean production of Hamlet, shows the historical realism and growing spatial awareness of the last century. The varied interests and experiments of our own era are shown in five divergent stage sets: two naturalistic, and three semi-abstract. Stanislawsky, of the Moscow Art Theater, gives us the design for early 20th century naturalism in the set of Gorky's The Lower Depths. Donald Oenslager's design for the barn scene from Of Mice and Men combines realism with elements of abstraction. A Russian Constructivist set shows the break-up of stage space into different levels and the movement from the box-like picture-frame stage to the self-contained, sculptural space stage. A model of a scene by Gordon Craig and one by Adolphe Appia are pioneer set designs in the pure abstract, sculptural manner, with bold lines and forms that create their own space-time and describe the scenery of the mind and emotions.

The theater in the Orient is represented by two models - one of the classical Chinese Court Theater and the other the popular Japanese Kabuki Theater, with revolving stage and four settings. Exhibits of Chinese, Javanese and Balinese

shadow puppets and of classical Japanese Noh Theater costumes will add footnotes to the Oriental theater models.

Soon after the opening of this exhibit, the Museum plans to publish a more detailed description and explanation of the entire set of theater models on exhibit, in the form of a resume of the development of stage design.

Jane Grimes  
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